

The International Migration of the Highly Skilled: Demand, Supply, and Development Consequences in Sending and Receiving Countries

Wayne Cornelius, Thomas Espenshade, and Idean Salehyan (editors)
La Jolla. Center for Comparative Immigration Studies, UCSD, 2001

Jeanne Batalova

University of California, Irvine

The recent emphasis on the importance of knowledge, skills, and technologies in post-industrialized economies has brought the highly skilled component of U.S. immigration flows under scrutiny. Proponents of an increase in the flow of highly skilled immigrants point to a shortage in that segment of the domestic workforce and the significant economic and social contributions made by professionals who are immigrants. Opponents argue that highly skilled labor undercuts opportunities for the domestic workforce, driving down wages and undermining working conditions. Both sides stress the consequences for policies on immigration, education, science, labor, and national security.

The United States is not alone in shopping for highly skilled workers, which complicates the situation. Other labor-importing countries—Germany, Australia, Canada, Malaysia, and South Africa, to name a few—have been actively promoting, or at least considering, an increase in highly skilled immigration. The governments of key labor-exporting countries, such as India and China, also have a stake in the global flows of highly skilled workers.

The *International Migration of the Highly Skilled* is carefully crafted to describe and theorize the causes for the increase in temporary and permanent flows of professionally trained migrants and implications for both sending and receiving countries. The collection grew out of a fruitful conference concerning the migration of the highly skilled, which brought together scholars, researchers, policy makers, industry representatives, and students of international migration, global labor movements, and public policy.

Wayne Cornelius and Thomas Espenshade take the reader to the center of contemporary debates on the nature and impacts of U.S. immigration of the highly skilled by giving a succinct overview of the pros and cons and the supporting evidence from both sides. The authors also discuss the challenges that other labor-importing nations (for example, Germany) face in the competition for qualified foreign workers, which include the peculiarities of labor markets and

fiscal structures, low public tolerance for foreigners, lack of national consensus on the goals of immigration policy, and complicated immigration systems.

Although it seems that the United States has worked out an efficient and flexible immigration policy for employment-based immigrants and temporary workers, Margaret Usdansky and Thomas Espenshade suggest that many unresolved tensions still exist in that policy. One is between the need to attract immigrants who can contribute economically and thus help the nation to compete internationally versus the need to ensure that domestic workers are not displaced or otherwise negatively affected. Usdansky and Espenshade outline the history and socioeconomic context of relevant U.S. legislation, with a specific focus on its implications for admission and integration of both permanent and temporary (H1-B visa) highly skilled migrants.

Robert Bach, a senior Immigration and Naturalization Service official during the Clinton administration, provides an insider's view on the impacts of immigration policies on the U.S. labor market, and on employment and earning opportunities for both high- and low-skilled domestic and immigrant workers. While Bach brings low-skilled workers into the policy-making picture, Christian Zolniski convincingly argues for the acknowledgment of those whose contribution to the success of the high-tech economy goes largely unnoticed and unappreciated. Zolniski examines the role played by service workers, janitors, and cleaners who maintain the high-tech industry. The author analyzes their socio-demographic characteristics, occupational and earnings opportunities, as well as their response to substandard labor and working conditions.

Bach and Zolniski agree that structural demands of the U.S. economy drive the immigration of both highly skilled and low-skilled workers, and that striking similarities exist between H1-B workers and janitors. They also concur that immigration debates, especially regarding temporary foreign workers, should not be restricted to "pro-" and "anti-" immigration arguments but rather should be part of comprehensive labor-market reform.

Rafael Alarcón continues the discussion of U.S. immigration policy. He focuses on its labor-market impacts, specifically on its role in the formation of immigrant labor-market niches in high-tech industry. He argues that U.S. immigration policy in the mid-1960s facilitated selective immigration of highly educated Indians and other Asians, which resulted in their disproportionate concentration in professional occupations. On the other hand, since the mid-nineteenth century, U.S. immigration policies regarding Mexicans instituted the migration of low-skilled workers to be employed, first, in railroad construction and, later, in agriculture. These diametrically opposed policies resulted in immigrants' specialization in certain occupations, making Indians cerebreros (brain workers) and Mexicans braceros (arm workers).

Lindsay Lowell creates a socio-demographic profile of the foreign workers who come to the United States to work temporarily on H1-B visas. He also addresses the controversy over the

existence of a shortage of skilled labor in the information-technology sector. The H1-B workers are at the center of the political and public debates on this issue. Jean Gurcak and his collaborators address the consequences for the labor market of the presence of highly skilled foreign scientists and engineers. They also tackle another controversial topic: the impact of foreign students trained in U.S. universities have on the composition of graduate-school student bodies, as well as the competition those international students pose for domestic students (especially minorities and women), and when they enter the workforce as H1-B or green-card workers, for domestic workers.

Magnus Lofstrom and Analee Saxenian document the settlement of highly skilled immigrants in certain geographic areas, which promotes the development of ethnic economic niches and entrepreneurship. Such developments may be positive and negative for both immigrant and native professionals. On one hand, by opening their businesses, professional immigrants not only contribute to the information-technology economy, but also create new jobs that both native and foreign workers can fill. On the other hand, their increasing presence may have wage-depressing effects. Given this ambiguity, Marc Rosenblum calls for more research on the impacts on the U.S. labor market of highly skilled immigrants.

Aneesh Aneesh and Paula Chakravartty indicate that developing countries, such as India and China, are also the key players in the global movement of highly skilled labor. With his discussion of virtual migration, Aneesh challenges our conventional perception of “migration,” “labor,” and “trade” between countries. For example, the development of fast computer and communication technologies as well as changing labor practices allow the programmer in India to communicate with clients in the United States, or to access and implement changes to a computer in Canada. This “invisible and disembodied process of labor supply” along with more traditional “body shopping” (bringing high skilled workers on H1-B visas to work as contractors in U.S. companies) become important options in the era of global capitalism (p. 355). Aneesh stresses the need to develop new conceptualizations and analyses of international labor migration.

Chakravartty discusses the role of so-called flexible citizens, “the financiers and brokers of the practices of body shopping, long-term emigration, and return migration” of India’s highly skilled migrant class. These “flexible citizens” promote business and government ties between India and the United States, the development of high-tech industry in India, and changes in the relationship between science, the state, and the market in postcolonial India (p. 326). Many are Americans of Indian descent, and they advocate a liberalization of the Indian economy, a reduction of state influence on scientific knowledge production, a promotion of a global image of India as a “manpower exporter,” as well as new forms of citizenship and voluntary charity rather than state intervention. Such an agenda is not shared ubiquitously as many are concerned with increasing social inequality and point to growing labor shortages in India. “Brain drain” is likely to stay a thorny issue in Indian politics.

Mahmood Iqbal's essay indicates that brain drain is not a problem of developing countries only. He argues that Canada also should be concerned that its highly skilled citizens leave for the United States in search of brighter economic opportunities—higher earnings, lower taxes, and better jobs. Education, health, and social services, which the Canadian government heavily subsidizes, are in some sense wasted if Canadian professionals choose to contribute to the U.S. economy instead of to their own. Arguments that highly skilled immigrants are good substitutes for the professionals emigrating from Canada do not convince Iqbal. As Monica Boyd discusses in her essay, foreign-born engineers, as a group, are less likely than Canadian-born engineers to be in jobs that correspond to their training. This suggests at least some “mismatch” for immigrant professionals. Moreover, the wage gap between foreign-born and native-born workers with comparable education is slow to narrow. Some of her findings are similar to what Saxenian and Lofstrom observed in the case of U.S. highly skilled immigrants.

Rosenblum concludes the volume by suggesting policy implications. He argues that in the context of a “third industrial revolution”—the information revolution—the U.S. national interest, in regard to the immigration of the highly skilled, lies in maximizing national wealth and security while minimizing negative wage effects of the expanding labor market. Among the various paths to achieve these goals, Rosenblum believes the best is to expand permanent immigration of the highly skilled, which will limit downward pressure on wages and promote the social integration of immigrants.

The *International Migration of the Highly Skilled* offers highly informative, well-structured, and comprehensive essays. Its distinctive feature is a cross-disciplinary and cross-national collaboration, which makes it a treasury of original ideas, fresh theoretical perspectives, diverse methodological approaches, and challenging policy suggestions. However, the authors do not apply a consistent definition of the “highly skilled” concept, with some including under that rubric only scientists and engineers, while others extend it to managers, health-care professionals, and other professionals. This is understandable given the relatively new emphasis on the immigration of the highly skilled, but future efforts might benefit from the development of a common definition. The collection will be of interest to a diverse readership, because it invites researchers to join their efforts in exploring a new agenda of immigration research that has, and will have, strong connections with labor, family, social inequality, national security, education, and science issues in many countries.